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AUTHOR Durrington, Colleen; Bacon, Cheryl M.  
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## ABSTRACT

This case study describes the theory behind and the process of developing a learning community program at Abilene Christian University (ACU), Texas. The program, initiated in 1996, was developed to improve community and student retention and to provide opportunities for faculty renewal and professional development. Review of the research on learning communities indicates that learning communities have substantial positive effects on retention and can reinvigorate faculty, especially mid-career faculty. The process of creating learning communities at the ACU College of Arts and Sciences is described, including interest luncheons to inform faculty members about the concept of learning communities. Three learning communities that involved integrating three courses in a thematic approach were offered to freshmen in the fall of 1997. Problems encountered focused on such marketing errors as giving responsibility for program marketing to the admissions department and failing to integrate the learning community program into the registration procedure. These problems were addressed in the nine learning communities offered during the program's second year. Preliminary evaluation was mixed, although systematic tracking of 125 students has now begun. (DB)

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Making Connections Through Learning Communities:  
A Case Study in the Creation and Development of Learning Communities at  
Abilene Christian University

Dr. Colleen Durrington  
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences  
Abilene Christian University

Dr. Cheryl M. Bacon  
Associate Professor and Chair  
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication  
Abilene Christian University

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## Introduction: Why we choose to begin a Learning Community program at ACU

Among colleges and universities throughout our country, enthusiastic interest in Learning Communities and other efforts toward integrating curriculum has captured the attention and imagination of professors and administrators on many campuses. Because of their potential for supporting institutional goals related to learning and to such volatile issues as student retention, more and more institutions have begun Freshman Interest Groups (FIGS), clustered classes, linked courses and other variations of Learning Communities.

Abilene Christian University embarked on this adventure in 1996 because faculty and administrators believed that Learning Communities were academically sound, could improve community and retention, and offered opportunities for faculty renewal and professional development.

Research over the last ten years supported these beliefs. Roberta Matthews and colleagues give an excellent summary of this research in the *Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum*.<sup>1</sup> They point out the academic advantage of Learning Communities in creating better working relationships between faculty and students, thereby enhancing academic achievement. Studies at Evergreen State College and other colleges in Washington indicate that "students in learning communities made significant and unusual leaps in intellectual development." (p.469) Similar studies at Temple University confirm other

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<sup>1</sup> Matthews, Roberta, et al. "Creating Learning Communities," In J. Goff and J. Ratcliff (Eds.) *Handbook of the Undergraduate Curriculum*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

research indicating that students in learning communities receive higher grades than students not in communities.<sup>2</sup>

The same authors point out several studies that indicate students in Learning Communities are retained at a higher rate and are more likely to complete their degrees. The retention factor is especially important that the freshman level and many universities have concentrated their learning community efforts at that level. Currently, retention is a primary focus at our university, one reason that creation of the communities has received broad support from higher levels of administration.

Gabelnick, MacGregor, Mathews and Smith, in *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines*, identify several institutions with incredible success in improving retention through learning communities.<sup>3</sup> La Guardia Community College's Learning Clusters have a retention rate close to 90% and studies of community colleges in Washington state indicate similar rates. Nationwide, students in learning communities have retention rates that are ten to twenty percent higher than those not involved in communities.

Learning Communities also provide opportunities for faculty development. Faculty members become excited about opportunities to team-teach, plan with faculty members from other disciplines and further develop collegial relationships with other faculty.

Mathews points out that learning communities may be especially attractive to mid-career faculty members who may be experiencing burnout from teaching the same

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<sup>2</sup> Matthews, p. 471.

<sup>3</sup> Gabelnick, Faith, et.al. *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Student, Faculty, and Discipline*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1990.

courses again and again.<sup>4</sup> Looking at these courses in a new way with colleagues from other disciplines can reinvigorate a faculty member. The challenges of developing a theme and integrating that theme throughout several courses may be a welcome challenge.

In Patricia Cross' excellent article, "Why Learning Communities? Why Now?" in the August 1998 issue of *About Campus*, she concludes her discussion with this statement:

Why is there a growing interest in learning communities? I have tried to answer that question by suggesting that learning communities are of high interest now because they are compatible with changing epistemologies about the nature of knowledge, because research generally supports their educational benefits, and because they help institutions of higher education meet their missions of educating students for lives of work and service.<sup>5</sup>

## **I. How Learning Communities at ACU were created**

Abilene Christian University is a comprehensive university with approximately 4,600 students, 900 to 1,000 of whom will be freshmen in any given year. The retention rate from freshman to sophomore years is about 74 percent. The faculty generally is open to new ideas and opportunities and so the time was right to begin this endeavor. Because we believed learning communities could make a positive difference for our faculty and for our students, particularly incoming freshmen, plans were begun to implement them.

About 70 percent of all undergraduates and 65 percent of the full-time faculty reside in the College of Arts and Sciences. Departments in the college also offer many of the courses that lend themselves to an integrated program. In 1996, the dean of that college (also one of the authors of this presentation) had read much about Learning Communities and had attended sessions at conferences concerning other campuses' experiences with them. She also was serving on a Student Success Team at ACU that was studying retention, and she directed the freshman orientation course, University Seminar,

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<sup>4</sup> Matthews, et al. P. 472.

required of all incoming freshmen. From that posture, the dean took a logical leadership role in the development of the Learning Communities program on the ACU campus.

As will be explained below, faculty from other colleges was invited to participate, and some have chosen to do so. The College of Arts and Sciences, however, has been the primary home of the program and the source of the majority of courses and faculty for the communities.

The program's initial goals were simple:

To enhance the learning of students

1. by demonstrating the interdisciplinary nature of courses
2. by providing faculty with new and innovative teaching opportunities
3. by providing "community" for students to connect with each other and with ACU

Like most new projects at a university, the first steps to a successful beginning are achieving permission and gaining funding. A provost new to the campus was actively encouraging innovation and projects that contributed to the scholarship of teaching. He granted approval for a pilot year and funding of up to \$500 per learning community for projects and out-of-class activities. He also agreed to sign an initial letter to about 45 faculty members selected by the dean as individuals who were likely to be interested in such a program. Two interest luncheons were conducted during the 1996-97 academic year, the first designed to inform faculty members about the concept of Learning Communities and cultivate interest. Information was distributed about Learning Communities at other institutions, as well as some of the literature pointing out the benefits of learning communities. As an added perk, faculty members also were told about the promised funding for projects and out-of-class activities.<sup>6</sup>

As faculty members became more aware of the potential benefits of Learning Communities, they wanted to become involved. In a very unscientific manner, at a second

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<sup>5</sup> Cross, K. Patricia. "Why Learning Communities? Why Now?", July-August 1998, pp. 4-11.

interest luncheon, an English and a University Seminar teacher were seated at each table. Then other faculty members present were asked to "pick a group." In this highly informal manner, faculty self-selected groups based on mutual interest and existing collegial relationships.

The reason for initially including the English and University Seminar courses in the communities was to assure that each community included a writing intensive course where students would be challenged to write about the linkages and experiences created by the community. The Seminar provided a more loosely structured non-academic course where teachers and students would have more time for social interaction and discussion about the connections themselves as opposed to the course content. The latter was important because most faculty did not anticipate actually changing the content of the Communities' component courses, but rather through planning and coordination to make sure that occasional touchpoints and overlays were achieved during the semester.

Interestingly, one of the most successful communities included neither an English course nor a university seminar course. Instead, an entry-level journalism class served as the writing intensive course for the community. None of the faculty involved was teaching university seminar so that element was not included. Ultimately, this proved to be the only "pure" community and was one of the most successful as will be illustrated in further discussion.

Three learning communities emerged that were offered to incoming freshmen in the fall of 1997:

1. Words, Images and Power - LRNC 101.01  
National government  
Introduction to Art  
Creating Media Messages

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<sup>6</sup> Cross, K. Patricia. "Why Learning Communities? Why Now?", July-August 1998, pp. 4-11.

2. The Power of the Word - LRNC 102.01  
Fundamentals of Communication  
Composition and Rhetoric  
Life and Teachings of Jesus
3. Energetics: Energy and You - LRNC 103.01  
Composition and Rhetoric  
Concepts of Health and Fitness  
University Seminar

Themes for the communities were selected by the faculty members, based on mutual interests and the natural connections they identified among the courses they chose to include in the communities.

Conceptually, we imagined that students also would self-select in response to materials we would provide. Of course, we over estimated the effectiveness of our intended marketing as well as the openness of 18 year-olds to the concept. In reality, filling the communities was one of several major problems we encountered in that first year.

## **II. Mistakes along the way and how we resolved most of them**

In the first year, we faced several problems, most of which we were able to resolve in year two. The biggest challenge was a two-pronged marketing problem. We began with the view that we need only inform incoming freshman about the program and its benefits and allow them to self-select the communities in which they were interested. In that regard, we underestimated the nature of our challenge in several ways.

### **A. We turned the marketing of the program over to the Admissions Office.**

A brochure was designed and printed to accompany a direct mail letter drafted by a faculty member with professional experience in direct marketing. Although material



was sent to Admissions and they agreed to send it to all admitted new freshmen, we failed to communicate effectively with the Admissions staff and the materials remained on someone's desk and were not mailed until after the first summer orientation, which was the second largest of three on campus pre-registration opportunities for incoming freshmen.

The second marketing failure was failing to adequately inform the department chairs, academic advisers and department secretaries about the program. A letter about the program was sent to all advisers, but department chairs were not specifically enlisted to encourage advisers to push the communities. To further complicate matters, the communication between Admissions and advisers about a new telephone pre-registration process bogged down and so some students never talked with an academic adviser, only with an admissions counselor who in turn emailed the students' course preferences to the department where actual enrollment was handled.

#### **B. We put too much faith in the memories of 18-year-olds**

A significant percentage of the freshman class already has pre-registered for fall classes by the time the Learning Community materials were mailed. Meanwhile, other written materials were being sent to freshmen explaining how to go about pre-registering by telephone, a process that was in itself a new venture that was supposed to involve a cooperative effort between admissions counselors and advisers within the academic departments. The pre-registration instructions that were mailed made no mention of the Learning Communities. When freshmen called to pre-register, the instructions they worked from were those received from admissions about the pre-registration process, and the verbal instructions they received from their admissions counselor over the phone. If

the incoming freshmen had read the Learning Communities materials, they no doubt had forgotten about them by the time they enrolled for classes.

### **C. The registration process didn't work.**

The first year no system was established to enroll in all classes in a community at one time; the adviser or whoever was putting students in classes via the online system had to enroll each student in all three classes individually. The courses did carry a Learning Community label, and the system would reject enrollment in each individual class if the person inputting classes failed to enroll the student in all three classes. But frequently this rejection was seen as a system error and students were incorrectly forced into a single course by some well-meaning adviser or department secretary who only understood that the section was not full.

This problem was exacerbated by the marketing problem detailed above late in the summer when other English classes began to fill. Because seats remained in the Learning Communities, advisers began forcing students into the English classes without enrolling them in the other classes in the community. The result was that the two communities that included an English course had no course that was a "pure" class with only learning community members enrolled. This was a real detriment in facilitating the desired level of interaction among the courses. We learned that we had to have at least one class with only learning community participants. The next year the Registrar's Office worked out a method where advisers enrolled students in a learning community - not in each class. The system did not allow advisers to enroll students in individual classes in the community and did not allow students to be forced into sections.

#### **D. The community that worked**

The only Learning Community with at least once course that was "pure" was LRNC 101.01 Words, Images and Power, the community comprising an entry level journalism course called Creating Media Messages, National Government, and Intro to Art. One reason it succeeded was that it began with conditions that were believed to be inherent problems. Unlike the other communities where all the courses were part of the university's core curriculum, the journalism course was primarily taken by majors in the Journalism and Mass Communication Department; others were welcome to enroll for elective credit if they met the admission requirement of a 24 or higher English ACT score or 540 or higher SAT verbal score. After arriving on the campus students also could gain admission to the course by passing a standardized grammar punctuation and spelling exam, but this was of no help in recruiting incoming freshmen. Thus the potential number of enrollees was limited to incoming JMC majors with English or Verbal scores well above average.

As was the case in the other communities, the writing intensive course was the only one of the three courses that was designed to be a "pure" community course. The other two courses would be larger sections, 45 for National Government and 50 for Intro to Art. Creating Media Messages was limited to 15 students by the size of the computer lab in which it met.

Recognizing this problem from the outset, the professor who taught that course (one of the presenters here) secured a list of all incoming freshmen who had declared themselves a JMC major, about 50 in all. The department secretary then identified the students who had the needed test scores for enrollment in the course and the professor called the students individually to recruit them for the community. Because she also was an academic adviser in the department, she could make this pitch as part of the telephone

enrollment process. Despite the more limited enrollment pool for this community, the personal attention paid off and the community was the first to fill and the only community with at least one course limited to learning community members.

#### **E. How we addressed these problems the next year:**

In the early spring semester of 1998, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences met personally with the Admissions Office director and counselors, explained what the Learning Community program, gave them materials and tried to sell them on learning communities. As a result, they became recruiters for the communities, and the materials went out on time.

Department chairs also received more information about the Learning Communities. Redundancy proved to be helpful in breaking through the barrage of campus mail and email. Perhaps most importantly, the faculty members who participated in the communities, even those that had no "pure" community course, were unanimously enthusiastic about the program, and so word-of-mouth marketing among faculty and advisers prompted a more attentive response when the time came to enroll freshmen for fall.

During the 1997-98 school year, all interested faculty were encouraged to plan learning communities. Of the nine faculty who participated the first year, all but one returned to the program. In addition fourteen other faculty members joined to form eight communities as follows:

1. Health Science through the Eyes of Faith - LRNC 101.01  
University Seminar  
General Biology Lecture  
General Biology Lab  
General Chemistry Lecture  
General Chemistry Lab

2. Words and The Word - LRNC 102.01  
Composition and Rhetoric  
New Testament Greek for Beginners  
Life and Teachings of Jesus
3. Being Counter-Cultural People - LRNC 103.01  
Composition and Rhetoric  
University Seminar  
Christianity and Culture
4. Power of the Word - LRNC 104.01  
Composition and Rhetoric  
Fundamentals of Communication  
Life and Teachings of Jesus
5. Words, Images and Power - LRNC 105.01  
Creating Media Messages  
National Government  
Introduction to Art
6. Accelerate - LRNC 106.01  
Beginning Algebra  
Beginning Algebra Lab  
Introduction to Writing  
Introduction to Writing Lab  
University Seminar
7. Identity Through Christ and Community - LRNC 107.01  
Composition and Rhetoric  
Life and Teachings of Jesus  
University Seminar
8. Identity Through Christ and Community - LRNC 107.02  
Composition and Rhetoric  
Life and Teachings of Jesus  
University Seminar

In addition to continued broad participation by faculty from departments in the Arts and Sciences, five of the eight communities included a course and faculty member from the College of Biblical Studies, one of these communities was primarily designed for Bible majors. The JMC-based community remained intact with only a change in the art teacher, the result of a professional development leave granted to the original faculty

member. Two communities also were created to appeal too narrower target audiences, one for students entering the pre-med and pre-dental program, and another for students who were required by virtue of low standardized test scores to enroll in remedial courses offered through the university's Academic Advance program.

Two upper division communities were planned but did not draw enough students to make. Because all of our freshmen must enroll in Bible, English and University Seminar, we have found that communities for incoming freshmen are the easiest to organize. In some ways, they are also the most needed, at least from the part of retention and community building.

### **III. What activities proved successful in Learning Communities?**

Although each learning community is different, some similar activities have been planned by several of the communities. Most students have spent time in one or more of the professors' homes for lunch or dinner. Some included an activity tied to the community there, such as watching All the President's Men in the Words, Images and Power community. Many communities had service projects such as writing a script for a presentation at a Nursing Home. Some visited art exhibits or other activities in the community.

The purpose of all of these activities was to help students become a real community and for many to increase the students' understanding of the theme.

### **IV. What about assessment?**

We did begin an assessment process last year in our learning communities. However, because only one was a "pure" community, we decided to make this fall our base year and we revised our instruments to better reflect what we really wanted to know.

Last year we asked students and professors to grade us on how well we accomplished our three purposes. We found we made As and Bs on providing faculty with new and innovative teaching opportunities and on providing community for students to connect with each other and the university. However, we made Bs and Cs on demonstrating the interdisciplinary nature of the courses.

On a Likert scale, 82 percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they had enjoyed the learning community experience and 77 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the Learning Community experience to others. This year 89 percent or 109 of 123 agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend learning communities to others. Only 3 students or 2 percent said they disliked the experience and 85 percent said it was "one of the most positive experience of my freshman year."

This year we have begun tracking the 125 students who were in learning communities. We will track retention and GPA and compare them with freshmen not in learning communities.

## **V. Conclusion**

We plan to continue with Learning Communities next year! We have eight planned, six of which are repeats. We believe they are worth the effort and hope to increase the number in the future.



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Organization/Address: Abilene Christian University ACU Box 27915, Abilene, TX 79699	Telephone: 915-674-2209	FAX: 915-674-6800
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